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Timely Meditations?: Oswald Spengler's Philosophy of History Reconsidered

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ABSTRACT: This paper argues that the recent renewal of interest in the philosophy of Oswald Spengler, particularly concerning its warnings of the imminent demise of Western Civilisation, is misplaced. Arguments concerning the accuracy of his predictions or cultural analysis have overlooked the necessity of evaluating the coherence of the philosophical system that Spengler used to generate and justify his speculative declarations. Such an evaluation indicates a number of apparent contradictions at the heart of Spengler's historical model. The attempt to resolve these contradictions has resulted in a sharp division of interpretation amongst Spengler commentators, into positivist and relativist camps. Neither interpretation, I suggest, is capable of rendering Spengler's historical system coherent. It is therefore argued that Spengler's philosophy is fundamentally flawed.

KEY WORDS: Comparative analysis of cultures, Oswald Spengler, philosophy of history, positivism, relativism.

1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of popular interest in the theories of Oswald Spengler, author of *The Decline of the West*. Many a journalistic thinkpiece now begins with a portentous quotation from Spengler's 1918 tome or a reference to its invocation of an atmosphere of crisis and disorder.[1] This interest, sparked largely by political events in Europe, has tended to focus on themes concerning the life-span of cultures and the imminent death of Western Civilisation, which in turn are founded upon Spengler's cyclical

[1] See for instance Bew (2017), Kaplan (2018), Leuck (2017, 2018), Newcomb (2018) and Samadder (2018).

model of world-history and the 'laws' derived therefrom. In the present day, as at the time of the publication of the *Decline*, most analyses of the merits of Spengler's philosophy have tended to focus on the credibility of the empirical support for his models and prognostications, or the desirability (or otherwise) of its political implications. This paper makes no attempt to intervene at this level of the debate around, effectively, the question of the contemporary relevance of Spengler's work. This paper will instead take a different critical tack and will consider the conceptual coherence of Spengler's historical model. The reason for this is as follows: it is upon the viability of Spengler's historico-philosophical model of world history that his cultural criticism and historical prognostications depend. And yet, I argue, the coherence of this model has yet to be examined adequately.

Turning to the secondary literature one is soon struck by the marked lack of consensus on the correct interpretation of Spengler's model. Standard accounts of Spengler's philosophy tend to favour either a positivist or a relativist interpretation, neither of which is compatible with the other. This interpretative dichotomy, I argue, stems not from Spengler's opacity but from a paradox embedded at the heart of his theory concerning the possibility of inter-cultural comparisons.

The tension in Spengler commentary revolves around the issue of whether Spengler's philosophy of history should be understood objectively, as a science of history that seeks to uncover universal and observable law-like regularities in the course of history (the positivist view), or subjectively, as a culture-specific expression of a perspectival historical aesthetics (the relativist view).[2]

[2] Since Spengler's work first appeared in English in 1926 there have only been three major academic works published in English on his philosophy of history. The first, *Oswald Spengler: A Critical Estimate* by historian of ideas H. Stuart Hughes was published in 1952, the second, *History and Prophecy* by Klaus P. Fischer in 1989, and the third, *Prophet of Decline* by John Farrenkopf in 2001. The majority of material that I draw upon to construct what I term the received view on Spengler's philosophy of history comes from articles and book chapters from the last century. However, in my defence I would point out that judging from Spengler's rare appearances in recent secondary literature there have not been any radical changes in Spengler interpretation since the 1930s. What differentiates recent articles on Spengler from those of the last century has more to do with the current belief that the later writings of Spengler differ sufficiently from the earlier ones that one might speak of two Spenglerian philosophies of history, than with any alterations in interpretation of the (early) philosophy of history put forward in *Decline*. Farrenkopf's depiction of Spengler's philosophy in his 2001 book does not differ that greatly from that of Hughes's in 1952, and the brief mentions of Spengler's work in current reference works or journal articles tend to simply recapitulate certain of the five key elements (section 2), mainly the portrayal of cultures as organisms and the predictive powers of the laws of history. See for instance Berry (2009), Breisach (2003), Kelley (2006), or Daniel Little's entry for the Philosophy of History in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy.

I shall consider the relativist and positivist interpretations of Spengler's philosophy of history, and those positions that attempt to integrate both the positivist and relativist interpretations, and will evaluate their efforts to produce a coherent account of Spengler's philosophy of history. I will argue that, whilst some attempts are more successful than others, ultimately all attempts at forming Spengler's historical views into a coherent philosophical position tend to founder on what I term the comparative paradox, Spengler's apparent use of the comparative analysis of cultures to justify his universal predictive laws of history *and* his insistence on the relativity of all historical consciousness and all historical 'truths'.

A positivist reading requires that such comparison be possible, whilst a relativist reading tends to require that it be impossible. And yet, to validate either interpretation results in the loss of much of what makes Spengler's philosophy distinctive, such as his claims to have discovered the laws of historical development, or his statements concerning the irrevocability of Western cultural decline. In other words, it seems that one can only navigate this internal contradiction within Spengler's philosophy of history by doing violence to one or more central elements of his thought. Neither a positivist or relativist reading of Spengler is viable, I suggest, nor are other intermediate positions between either interpretative poles. I conclude by arguing that, regardless of its alleged 'prescience' concerning the fate of the West, Spengler's philosophy is fundamentally flawed and internally incoherent.

2. The Received View

In this section I outline the key elements of the received view on Spengler's philosophy of history. Given the notable amount of disagreement amongst Spengler's commentators on the relative importance of certain aspects of his philosophy of history and their order of conceptual priority, this account is not meant to be either comprehensive or prescriptive. Rather it seeks to identify those points or themes that most commentators would agree to be central to Spengler's position:

1) *Cyclical Model*: Spengler holds that human history in general (as opposed to the history of particular peoples or cultures) has an overall pattern, namely the rise and fall of individual cultures.
2) *Culture-Organisms*: Spengler argues that cultures, like organisms, have a life-cycle and that each culture (barring the intervention of external forces) must necessarily pass through the same stages (birth, maturity, senescence, death).
3) *Destiny*: Spengler claims that the cyclical pattern of world history is formed by the operation of 'destiny', by which he means the fixed

laws of internal development that govern the development of culture-organisms.

4) *Cultural Isolation*: Spengler insists that each culture is autochthonous. That is to say that it is entirely self-originating and original with regards to its cultural content. Each culture comes into being and departs without imparting or receiving any cultural content from or to other contemporaneous, preceding or succeeding cultures.
5) *Meaning*: Spengler argues that, despite exhibiting a cyclical pattern, human history is ultimately aimless and without meaning.

Standard analyses of Spengler's general philosophical outlook tend to define his views as either positivist or relativist. Thus, he is either an heir of Comte seeking the universal laws of historical change, or he is a relativist of a (usually) Nietzschean stripe describing a universe of pure flux devoid of meaning and purpose except as an aesthetic spectacle. Moving on to the question of the implications of Spengler's philosophy of history, those who incline towards the view of Spengler as a positivist argue that as Spengler held that there are laws of human history and that he had discovered them, then historical truth (in the sense of universally valid laws) is not merely possible but actual. Those who support the relativist interpretation, on the other hand, argue that Spengler held that all truths are necessarily relative to a particular culture-organism and hold no truth value outside those cultures. Thus, there can be no universal historical truths, only historically limited local truths based upon the perspective of a specific culture.

Turning now to the question of the internal coherence of Spengler's position, it is by no means obvious how it might be the case that historical truth is both objective and perspectival, universal and local. In light of this apparent and rather obvious incompatibility, it then seems unlikely that Spengler intended his philosophy of history to support both a positivist and relativist historical outlook. In other words, it seems most improbable that Spengler intended his philosophy to be conceptually contradictory in this manner. And yet, as we shall see, there is material in *Decline* that appears to support both the positivist and the relativist interpretation. Much of the debate among commentators over Spengler's philosophy of history, I suggest, is the attempt to resolve the apparent contradictions in Spengler's philosophical outlook in favour of one interpretation or the other.[3] In the following sections I will

[3] It should be noted that much of the academic commentary on Spengler takes no position whatsoever on the issue of whether Spengler's philosophy of history is relativist or positivist. Much of it takes the form of surveys of his work of the type usually found in reference works and, whilst not necessarily uncritical in tone, if these works do take issue with Spengler's historical outlook it tends to be with its supposed pessimism (Cook 1963), its political implications (Lewis 1927, Heller 1952, Stuchtey 2012), faulty logic (Fischer 1970) or the historical

detail the major arguments of both the proponents of the positivist and the relativist positions, before arguing for a possibility not explicitly entertained by most commentators, namely that Spengler's philosophy of history is *prima facie* contradictory.

3. Spengler as Positivist

The key support for a positivist interpretation is Spengler's self-declared intention to furnish the reader with the laws of human history. The first line of the introduction to *Decline* reads, "(i)n this book is attempted for the first time the venture of predetermining history, of following the still untravelled stages in the destiny of a Culture" (Spengler 1926: 3). Armed with his concept of cultures as organisms with a fixed lifecycle Spengler locates current Western civilisation at a particular stage of the recurrent pattern of cultural development and plots its future trajectory. He states that, "our own time represents a transitional phase which occurs with certainty under particular conditions, there are perfectly well-defined states (such as have occurred more than once in the history of the past) *later* than the present-day state of West Europe", therefore "(t)he future of the West is… but a single phenomenon of history, strictly limited and defined as to form and duration, which covers a few centuries and can be viewed and, in essentials, calculated from available precedents" (Spengler 1926: 39).[4] History for Spengler becomes the analysis of past regularities in the development of cultures and the use of these regularities to predict the future. "(H)istory," he claims, "offers possibilities far beyond the ambitions of all previous research, … namely, of overpassing the present as a research-limit, and predetermining the spiritual form, duration, rhythm, meaning and product of the *still unaccomplished* stages of our western history" (Spengler 1926: 112).

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that some commentators should conclude that Spengler is proposing what amounts to a science of history. Gardiner describes Spengler simply as a "so-called 'scientific historian'" (Gardiner 1952: 22). Collingwood refers to Spengler's outlook as "positivistic naturalism" and his historical system as a "naturalistic science" (Collingwood 1961:

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evidence that Spengler used to support his system (Chisholm 1935, Santayana 1957, Walsh 1967, Berlin 2000, Kelley 2003) rather than its philosophical orientation.

[4] Regarding Spengler's use of the term 'later', Spengler holds that each culture follows a fixed sequence of developmental stages. Once one has identified which stage in the sequence Western civilisation currently occupies, one can then speak of 'later' stages in the cycle and of those stages in other historically prior cultures. As Spengler puts it, "I designate as contemporary two historical facts that occur in exactly the same – relative – positions in their respective Cultures" (Spengler 1926: 112). In this way Spengler can speak of the Kantians and the Epicureans, or Napoleon and Alexander as contemporaries.

181). In addition to the search for general laws of history, and the desire to predict the future scientifically, Collingwood also identifies Spengler's commitment to "external analysis" as "openly positivistic" (Collingwood 1961: 181–2). Even Hughes, one of Spengler's most sympathetic critics who himself favours the relativist interpretation of Spengler's philosophy of history, concedes that, "many of his historical preconceptions were naively and unashamedly positivist" (Hughes 1952: 55). The positivist interpretation also receives considerable support from the tables in *Decline* which outline the supposed results of Spengler's morphology of history. Each table has a column for Indian, Classical (Greco-Roman), Arabian and Western culture, and each table sets out chronologically the structurally isomorphic features of the spiritual, cultural and political development of each culture at each stage of the cultural lifecycle from Spring to Winter. The "ageing process", as Dray puts it, follows an "identical pattern" in each culture and each stage in one culture has an "exact correspondence" with the equivalent stage in another (Dray 1980: 107).

4. Spengler as Relativist

The relativist interpretation of Spengler's philosophy of history lays stress on Spengler's views on the temporality and perspectival nature of historical truths. Spengler argued that, "there are no eternal truths", only truths relative to a particular culture-organism (Spengler 1926: 41). These truths are not shared by the members of other cultures, nor are they transmissible between cultures (this is Spengler's cultural isolation thesis). These truths arise only within one particular culture and with the demise of that culture these truths also perish. The historical implication of this outlook, for many commentators, is a thoroughgoing scepticism about the universality, and very possibility, of historical truth. The consequence of this position, according to Mazlish, is "the elimination of the possibility of 'history-in-itself'. There are only various *perspectives* on history, enjoyed by each culture" (Mazlish 1966: 327). History cannot produce generalising laws.[5] As all values are specific to a particular culture, the understanding of other cultures will always be either extremely partial or impossible. It is an aspect of the human condition that one is never able to transcend one's own time. Referring to this outlook, Iggers states that, "(c)onstant in the flow of time are only the conditions of

[5] It is for this reason that several commentators have described Spengler's outlook as anti-positivistic. Farrenkopf locates Spengler's thought "in the German historicist tradition of antipositivism" in that he "denies the existence of historical laws" (Farrenkopf 2001: 22). Mazlish, similarly, sees Spengler's critique and abandonment of the Comtean tripartite scheme of historical development and the very notion of progressive linear historical development as anti-positivist (Mazlish 1966: 326–7).

human existence, and these no longer possess any content, but were merely a structure or form". He adds that for more "radical thinkers", amongst whom he includes Spengler, "the historicity of man spelled the anarchy of values" (Iggers 1984: 244).[6] For, as Hughes observes, according to Spengler "the members of one culture cannot understand the basic ideas of another, and when they think they are doing so, they are actually translating totally alien concepts into concepts they have developed on their own" (Hughes 1952: 73). Thus, there could never be universal laws of history, let alone predictions based upon those laws.

Further encouraging a relativist reading of his philosophy of history, it should be noted that Spengler applies the implications of this thoroughgoing relativism with regards to truth, not just to history and philosophy in general, but also to his own thought. Farrenkopf states that, "with logical consistency, Spengler argues that his philosophy of world history is only valid as an intellectual expression of the civilisation stage of the Faustian cycle" (Farrenkopf 2001: 44). Spengler acknowledges that his philosophy of history is *itself* culturally relative, and imbued with the values of Western civilisation. The cyclical system of the rise and fall of culture-organisms is, he says, "the picture of world-history that is natural to us, men of the West, and to us alone" (Spengler 1926: 26). His own philosophy of history, with its cyclical model of cultural change, is itself only possible within the late stages of Western civilisation and is comprehensible only to members of his own culture. It too has no claim to universal or historically transcendental truth, and it too will perish at the end of Western culture along with all other Western cultural products.

5. Either/or: Resolving the Contradiction

Both the relativist and the positivist interpretations draw support from Spengler's *Decline* and yet it would appear that they cannot both be correct unless Spengler's philosophy is inconsistent. The relativist interpretation understands Spengler to be arguing that, owing to the division between the 'world as Nature' and the 'world as History', historical thinking is *sui generis*. The history of cultures cannot be approached systematically and objectively in a scientific fashion. Rather, access to the truths of a culture requires the possession of that culture's Ur-symbol, the quasi-Kantian cultural *a priori*, and an intuitive understanding, or 'physiognomic tact'.[7] Historical truth is relative

[6] In other words, it is in the nature of humanity that humanity has no nature, only a history, or rather, histories.

[7] Spengler writes that, "(s)ympathy, observation, comparison, immediate and inward certainty, intellectual *flair* – … *these are the means of historical research* – precisely these and no others" (Spengler 1926: 25).

to one's location within a particular culture-organism and, in that sense, all history is contemporary history in that one cannot write history from outside one's own cultural vantage point. Thus, all history is necessarily perspectival. The positivist interpretation, by contrast, takes Spengler to be claiming that whilst history, as a topic of investigation, is of a different kind to that addressed by the natural sciences, it is still possible to formulate historical laws by building up a system of observed regularities and showing how they exemplify a general law. These laws are objectively valid, culturally transcendent and enable the prediction of future developments in human history. Faced with this apparent contradiction, commentators on Spengler's philosophy of history have developed several strategies to resolve the problem.[8]

5.1. Pure Relativism

For those commentators who favour a relativist interpretation, a first option is to dismiss the positivistic elements in Spengler's philosophy of history all together. This can be done by explaining away Spengler's nomothetic moments as metaphors that were never meant to be taken literally. For example, Collingwood, who read Spengler as a positivist, takes Spengler to task for his positivistic attitude to historical facts, and his comments apply just as well to his account of culture-organisms. They are, Collingwood argues, "positivistically conceived as isolated from each other instead of growing organically out of each other, … each with a fixed internal structure, but each related to the other non-historically. Their only interrelations are (a) temporal and spatial, (b) morphological" (Collingwood 1961: 182). Frye, who favours a relativist reading, defuses criticism of Spengler's positivism (like Collingwood's) by describing Spengler's cyclical laws as an "illusion" that neither implies nor necessitates "a mechanical principle" (Frye 1974: 5). Cook 'de-positivises' Spengler's account of culture-organisms, the prime units of historical analysis, in the same manner as Frye: Spengler's organisms are metaphors and thus neither true nor false. Their value lies in their ability to illuminate "certain phases of the historical process" rather than their truth value (Cook 1963: 314).

The problem with rationalising Spengler's inconvenient positivist moments as metaphors is that it appears to run contrary to Spengler's description of his own system. His description of the life-cycles of culture-organisms does not appear to suggest that we are meant to take it to be anything other than the description of a genuine historical process:

[8] The following analysis applies only to those commentators who have noticed that it is somewhat problematic to be a relativist and a positivist at the same time. Others, such as Iggers (1984) and Collingwood (1927a, 1927b, 1961) do not seem to view this as an issue.

> The notion of life-duration as applied to a man, a butterfly, an oak, a blade of grass, comprises a specific time-value, which is quite independent of all the accidents of the individual case… Now, such relations are valid also, and to an extent never hitherto imagined, for all the higher Cultures. *Every Culture, every adolescence and maturing and decay of a Culture, every one of its intrinsically necessary stages and -periods, has a definite duration, always the same, always recurring* (Spengler 1926: 109–110).

The culture-organisms themselves are "higher individuals", each "a self-contained phenomenon", "an organism of rigorous structure and significant articulation". Or as Spengler puts it emphatically, "*Cultures are organisms*" (Spengler 1926: 26, 104). Whilst it is of course possible that Spengler's talk of cultures and their lifecycles is indeed metaphorical, there is little to suggest so in the manner that he describes and employs these terms. He speaks with what Neurath describes as "austere matter-of-factness" (Neurath 1973: 207). Indeed, Spengler seems to believe quite strongly that the entities and processes he describes are actual as opposed to figurative or poetic. He states, "(l)et the words youth, growth, maturity, decay – hitherto, and to-day more than ever, used to express subjective valuations and entirely personal preferences in sociology, ethics and aesthetics – be taken at last as *objective* [my emphasis] descriptions of organic states" (Spengler 1926: 26). With its stress on objectivity and its rejection of the subjective and aesthetic, there seems to be little that is metaphorical in Spengler's depiction of the elements of his historical system. Or, if these positivistic aspects *are* in fact metaphors, it seems to be the case that Spengler himself was either unaware of the fact, which seems improbable to say the least, or that he very much wanted his readers to think otherwise. The balance of probabilities would seem to suggest that Spengler's account was intended to be taken literally.

A second strategy for accommodating the positivistic content of *Decline* is to acknowledge its presence in Spengler's philosophy of history but to downplay its significance. Hughes, for instance, portrays Spengler as the more or less unwitting bearer of positivist tropes which had been *en vogue* in the preceding century.[9] Hughes favours a relativist interpretation of Spengler's philosophy of history but concedes that there are moments where Spengler is an "unwitting positivist" (Hughes 1952: 74). Spengler's philosophy of history is portrayed as relativist in the main, with the positivist content appearing as an aberration, a relic of the author's cultural Zeitgeist, that is in no way central to his philosophical system. Farrenkopf, similarly, acknowledges that there is a positivist dimension to Spengler's philosophy of history. He states that:

[9] Hughes states that Spengler's 'discovery' of morphological history "was simply a pretentious blowing-up of the biological or botanical metaphor that had haunted the whole nineteenth century" (Hughes 1952: 55).

> Spengler, *his own protests to the contrary* [my emphasis], with his methodical systematisation and patternisation of history, was largely nomothetic in approach, as were positivist historians. His aspiration to predictive powers also certainly places him in proximity to the positivist tradition… He shares the interest of many positivist Anglo-Saxon and French social scientists in searching for significant regularities and recurrences in history and the desire of some of them to imbue social scientific study with a measure of predictive ability" (Farrenkopf 2001: 84).

Despite this 'proximity' Farrenkopf maintains that Spengler is in fact a thoroughgoing relativist and anti-positivist who holds that "history reveals no transcendental meaning" and that there are "no eternal truths" (Farrenkopf 2001: 44). Farrenkopf argues that Spengler's positivism is in no way essential to the functioning of his philosophy of history and that those aspects of his thought that seem most positivistic (the ability to predict future historical developments) do not in fact stem solely from Spengler's "quasi-positivistic theory of analogous, structurally comparable cultural cycles" but are in fact rooted in his relativistic concept of historical consciousness (Farrenkopf 2001: 40). Consequently, jettisoning Spengler's positivist lapses in no way requires us to jettison the notion of historical laws and historical prediction. His philosophy of history functions just as well on purely relativist grounds.[10]

Thus the 'pure relativism' interpretation of Spengler's philosophy of history holds that all values (scientific, political, historical, etc.) are historically and geographically relative, that there are no trans-cultural values and that Spengler's predictive laws of history are either a rhetorical flourish and therefore not to be taken literally, or a regrettable positivistic hiccup to be excised and forgotten. Either way, the 'pure relativism' account is not burdened with explaining the possibility of trans-historical laws in Spengler's philosophy for the simple fact that, on this interpretation, there could never be any.

Commentators who interpret Spengler's philosophy of history in a positivist manner seem to find its relativism far less problematic than relativist interpreters do its positivism. Dray, for example, acknowledges Spengler's relativism, his argument for the meaninglessness of human history and the relativism of cultural values, and still maintains that Spengler's objective with his philosophy of history was "to provide us with an analysis that will justify historical prediction" (Dray 1980: 122). The obvious question that arises here is how exactly one can be a relativist about values and still insist on trans-cultural historical truths. And, to answer that question, we must consider how both the positivist and relativist interpretations believe Spengler grounds his historical 'truth' claims.

[10] I do not find Farrenkopf's argument here at all convincing and will return to this topic later when considering Spengler's comparative paradox.

5.2. Positivism

The positivist interpretation, as we have seen, holds that Spengler argued for the existence of laws of history and trans-cultural historical truths. On this account Spengler held that there were certain morphological structures common to all cultures and that, even though one cannot understand the meaning of those structures and their related cultural symbolic content, by means of systematic comparative analysis one can from a perspective external to the cultures under study and establish objectively the presence of those structures. This stems from his view of "every high culture as an organic entity with a life cycle of a determined length and with no purpose beyond its unfolding" (Breisach 1995: 398). One can then chart the order of repetition of these structures across cultures and, on the basis of this, develop predictive generalisations that enable one to predetermine the future course of an extant culture. And this can be done despite cultural isolation and the incommensurability of cultural values.

This reading was the most common amongst philosophers of history of the mid-20th century critical approach to the philosophy of history and it remains the standard model for those offering condensed versions of Spengler's thought in contemporary reference works.[11]

5.3. Nomological Relativism

A third interpretation, which one might term 'nomological relativism', holds that Spengler's philosophy of history is essentially relativist and also maintains that it argues for trans-cultural historical laws which are to be understood as universal and true, as opposed to being metaphorical. There are two types of nomological relativist interpretation that one finds in the secondary literature. The first and most common one might term unreflexive or descriptive nomological relativism and is typically found in reference works or survey articles. The problematic tension between Spengler's positivism and relativism is either overlooked or mentioned in passing. Take for instance R.N.D. Martin's encyclopaedia entry for Spengler:

> Spengler was an advocate of a cyclical view of history on the basis of a quasi-biological interpretation of the rise, maturity and decline of cultures. History was the story of the rise, maturity and decline of independent cultures between which there could be no genuine communication of cultural artefacts (Martin 1996: 742).

[11] For examples of the former see for instance Gardiner (1952), Collingwood (1961) and Kaplan (1978) and the latter, Durant (1968: 89–91) and Dray (1967: 527–530).

Martin notes Spengler's positivist project and scientific/scientistic historical laws of cultural change. He also notes Spengler's cultural isolation thesis, the cornerstone of his argument for historical relativism. Spengler's relativist ethos is noted, and Martin suggests the possibility that Spengler had "not faced up to the damaging consequences for his own historicist enterprise" (Martin 1996: 742). In other words, Martin identifies the tension between Spengler's relativism and his super-cultural claims for recurrent patterns of cultural change. No explanation for this tension is attempted. It is presented merely as an idiosyncrasy of Spengler's philosophy. Tucker too notes Spengler's positivistic morphological methodology, his "organic cycle of birth, maturation, decline and death", as well as his relativistic cultural isolation hypothesis. "Despite their morphological similarities", Tucker states, "different cultures cannot understand each other…" Tucker too notes the tension present between Spengler's relativism and his positivism. On Spengler's insistence on the impossibility of trans-cultural knowledge, Tucker comments that "Spengler's own brilliant interpretations of other cultures in fact suggest the opposite" (Tucker 1998: 861). Hoover similarly notes Spengler's "forceful system" and details the cyclical pattern and laws of development whilst also stating that for Spengler "truth was relative and based solely on the criteria of individual cultures" (Hoover 1999: 1138). Campbell also notes Spengler's "cultural relativism" and then goes on to consider the predictive capacities of his historical system based on underlying historical uniformities, "the discovery of the common essence of *all* cultures and the nature of the periods of a life-cycle which they share" (Campbell 1976: 443, 439). He too notes however that, despite Spengler's relativistic rejection of historical laws based on trans-cultural inductive generalisations, "some form of inductive reasoning is required to substantiate his claim that all cultures conform to a single pattern which lies behind the superficial features of all cultures" (Campbell 1976: 440).

Though the more detailed instances of this form of nomological relativism do acknowledge that there is something problematic in the presence of both positivist and relativist elements in his philosophy, they tend to describe it rather than analyse it or evaluate its significance for Spengler's overall position. The attempt to do so is what distinguishes the second form of nomological relativism. Proponents of what one might consider nomological relativism *proper* note the discordance between Spengler's cultural relativism and his argument for trans-cultural models of historical change, and attempt to account for the apparent discordance in a way that preserves firstly, a predominantly relativist reading of Spengler's philosophy of history, and secondly the notion of historical laws of trans-cultural validity. These laws, on this interpretation, are not to be understood as metaphors or poetic devices but as deterministic laws of universal validity. This is a position that Farrenkopf seems to adopt.

He maintains that Spengler advocated a "systematically grounded relativism" and yet developed a "grand methodical system" of history by means of which he could "forecast the general lines of future historical development" (Farrenkopf 2001: 81, 40).[12] The problem for such an interpretation is to explain how Spengler can plausibly argue that all historical truths are relative, except those that he claims have universal validity. And the attempt to do so must accommodate the problem of what I term Spengler's comparative paradox.

6. The Comparative Paradox

The issue here concerns how, or possibly whether, Spengler justifies his claims about the nature of historical truths. I am not concerned here with whether the historical claims that Spengler makes in support of his philosophical model are historically accurate, but rather with the question of whether his account of the way in which we can access historical 'truth' is a) coherent and b) compatible with any of the afore-mentioned interpretations of his philosophical system (pure relativist, positivist and nomological relativist). The problem that besets both positivist and nomological relativist interpretations concerns Spengler's mode of historical analysis. Spengler advocates the comparative analysis of different historical cultures as the appropriate method of historical analysis.[13] Spengler uses this firstly, to establish the impossibility of the comparative analysis of different historical cultures, and secondly, to justify his meta-historical model of the cyclical nature of cultural organisms.[14] Regarding the first point, the impossibility of comparative analysis, Spengler is quite explicit: "Each of the great Cultures… has arrived at a secret language of world-feeling that is only fully comprehensible by him whose soul belongs to that Culture. We must not deceive ourselves" (Spengler 1926: 178).[15] And again:

> We may take… words of Greek and translate them by words of our own like 'origin,' 'matter' and 'form,' but it is mere imitation, a feeble effort to penetrate into a world of feeling in which the finest and deepest elements, in spite of all we can do, remain dumb (Spengler 1926: 179).

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[12] Farrenkopf differs from many accounts by grounding Spengler's claims concerning the ability of his laws of history to predict future developments not in his comparative analysis of cultural structures but in the historical consciousness of Faustian humanity.

[13] I do not think that any Spengler commentator would dispute this statement regarding Spengler's methodology.

[14] Again, no Spengler commentator that I have encountered would dispute that these are the two main conclusions of Spengler's comparative analysis of cultures. Disagreement arises only among those who recognise the incompatibility of the two conclusions and in the means by which they attempt to resolve the paradox.

[15] Though, typically, Spengler does not cite him, it is nonetheless likely that he derived this view of the hermeneutical inaccessibility of other forms of life from the work of Dilthey.

In other words, to comprehend the cultural content of a culture one must belong to that culture. One cannot grasp the meaning of its symbols from the outside.

Regarding the second point, Spengler continuously introduces comparisons of different culture-organisms in order to demonstrate the repetition of stages in the life-cycle. For example, we are told that there is a correspondence between Classical and Western (Faustian) culture, between "the 'Trojan War' and the Crusades, Homer and the Niebelungenlied, through Doric and Gothic, Dionysian movement and Renaissance, Polycletus and Johann Sebastian Bach, Athens and Paris, Aristotle and Kant, Alexander and Napoleon, to the world-city and the imperialism common to both Cultures" (Spengler 1926: 27). Here the comparison of the two cultures is used to identify structural repetitions of events and historical roles at equivalent stages of the two cultures' life-cycles. In other words, this is the comparative morphology that Spengler claims will yield the common structural features of all cultures and with them the predictive laws of historical development.

Spengler's position appears to be that comparative analysis of different cultures is both impossible and necessary to yield historical laws. The first point is necessary for his argument concerning the relativism of values to a particular culture, the cultural isolation thesis, and the impossibility of linear models of historical change and/or progress. The second point is necessary for Spengler's trans-historical laws concerning the life-cycles of internal cultural development, cyclical nature of cultures, and the prediction of future cultural developments.[16] A proponent of the positivist interpretation might choose to discard the claim concerning the impossibility of cultural analysis, and the attendant relativist consequences, in order to salvage the possibility of trans-cultural historical truths and historical prediction based upon objective analysis of regularities in the patterns of cultural change. However, if one discards that position, there seems to be no reason to deny the possibility of inter-cultural communication and the mutual transmission of cultural content. And once inter-cultural transmission is conceded, there seems no reason to insist on the individuality of cultures, their autochthonous nature, their life-cycle or the necessity for cultural death at the end of the life-cycle. Indeed, there would be so little left of the key features of Spengler's philosophy of history, that one would be hard put to recognise it as such. Such an interpretation would effectively kill most of what is distinctive in Spengler's philosophy in order to save universal historical laws.

The nomological relativist interpretation, on the other hand, faces the problem of explaining how one can establish trans-cultural historical laws

[16] Felken also makes this point (1988: 56).

if the comparative analysis of different cultures is not possible. If all values are relative to a particular culture, how can one ever 'step out' of one's own culture to such a degree as to be able to access another culture? And if one cannot, then how could one ever formulate historical laws that hold outside one's own culture?

7. Conclusion

Spengler is best known as a philosopher of history and there exists a general consensus on the nature of his historical system and its key claims and concepts. Nonetheless, there is a marked tension within the consensus between those interpretations that concentrate on the relativistic aspects of Spengler's thought, those that stress the more positivistic aspects, and those who insist on the presence of both. Relativistic interpretations tend to lay emphasis on the centrality of the cultural isolation theory to Spengler's philosophy of history, whilst positivistic interpretations stress the importance of his trans-cultural laws of history and their predictive powers.

Both positivist and relativist elements are present in Spengler's philosophy of history and both types appear to play an important role in his historical model, such that one cannot extract or discard either without significantly altering Spengler's philosophy. Attempts to clarify the correct interpretative position on Spengler's thought are further complicated by the presence within his work of what I have termed the comparative paradox and the question of the possibility or impossibility of trans-cultural historical truths.

In short, both the positivist and the relativist interpretations fail to save Spengler's historical model and it is hard to avoid the conclusion that his philosophy of history is conceptually incoherent. That regardless of how 'timely' his prognostications and jeremiads might appear to be, their credibility is ultimately dependent on a historico-philosophical model that is itself fundamentally flawed. I suggest in closing that, despite its sudden reappearance in public debate, Spengler's philosophy of history should not be revisited, but rather declined.[17]

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